

OUR PRESENT DUTY:

A SERMON,

Preached in the First Presbyterian Church,

SOUTH BERGEN, N. J.,

BY

EDWARD W. FRENCH,

PASTOR.

JULY 20th, 1862.



NEW YORK:

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A SERMON.

“If the iron be blunt, and he do not whet the edge, then must he put to more strength: but wisdom is profitable to direct.”—*Ecclesiastes*, x., 10.

Suppose a man stands upon the bank of a bridgeless river, which he must cross. It is too deep for fording, and too swift for swimming. With his axe he can cause a tree to fall across it, and, upon the horizontal trunk, safely go over. But the axe is dull. He can do one of two things—either “put to more strength,” or “whet the edge.” “Wisdom is profitable to direct.”

If he is vigorous and muscular; if there are no more such streams to cross; if haste is necessary, it were wise to “put to more strength.”

If he is tired and feeble; if similar difficulties await him; if time is of no special account, let him “whet the edge.”

Is not here a picture of our National affairs? We are standing upon the shore of the river of Secession. The bridge of Compromise or of Treaty cannot be

built, because the bank is quicksand, and no bridge can stand. The furious current would quickly choke the foolhardy adventurer.

The tree of Rebellion grows upon the congenial shore. We of the North must cross. The axe of War is in our hands. We shall not leave Danger and Dishonor behind us, until that prostrate tree covers the stream.

But "the iron is blunt." For more than a year we have been hacking at its tough and vast trunk; yet it is strong to-day.

What saith Wisdom? Ye are young and stalwart. Strength is on your side. Rebeldom has Seven Hundred Thousand men, all told. Ye have three times as many. A right settlement of the question of Secession will be permanent; for the demon which is its spirit has but one life. Ye cannot afford to squander a day. The very hours are precious. Delay harrasses the brave, makes the feeble-minded arrant cowards, fortifies the foe by adding to his power here and to his prestige abroad, swells your expenditures and complicates your difficulties. Ye must not delay to "whet the edge" by the tedious processes of Statecraft, or by perfecting martial tactics or munitions. The needed change is not in the Instrument, but in the Agent.

Therefore, "put to more strength"! Gather, immediately, an energy whose terrific momentum shall speedily snap the last splinter of the tree of Treason!

The practical question for us to-day is—

How shall we, “put to more strength”? I offer three answers. First, by aiding the Enlistments.

Justice to our Generals and Soldiers, and the Crisis itself, demand more men; even now, in summer-heats—now, though they go to the Capitol without uniform and drill.

It ought to be a personal question with every young and middle-aged man—Why am I here? Why should I be in comfort and safety, when my fellow-countrymen are periling life itself? Am I honorably discharged by any disability?

Not the roving or adventurous disposition, not hope of gain or preferment, calls men to arms now, but Patriotism, which is Duty and Honor. Conscience sounds the clarion to-day. No business so remunerative, no love so fervent, no tie so strong, as will in itself warrant the withholding of a soldier! Shall none go but the unsettled, the unloved and solitary? Shall the foreign-born distance the native in the chivalric race, and wear his wreath? Shall these be our heroes and posterity's delight? Not thus has it been. Our best blood has reddened river and turf. To-day it tinges with manly pride the cheek of tens of armed thousands, as they gaze on “The Dear Old Flag.” Whose Husband, or Brother, or Son, is too good for our Country's need? Who will talk of price or cost, who will presume to estimate values, when Liberty, Authority, and Religion are at stake?

Consider the inevitable consequences of this strife,

even in event of our triumph! The excessive martial spirit, which spares an arm from a deadly struggle to shake defiance at Intervention—a war-loving spirit that is now fashioning the career of our children and of generations unborn—the National Debt, surpassing comprehension, whose pressures are yet to be felt—the palsy of Prosperity and the depreciation of Property—forms of inertness and decay—the National Loss, which must include the results of all our victories, for Rebeldom is a part of our Republic—the prolonged agonies of captives, of wounded, mutilated and sick—the multitude slain—the desolation of homes—the ruin of character—the standing libel upon Christianity by this mortal variance between those joined by Commerce, by Lineage and Language, by Marriage, by Historic Glories, and by the grander affiliations of the Church of Christ—this is a glimpse of results that cannot be escaped. Influences are self-perpetuating and immortal; and those, which this iniquitous Insurrection has begotten, will thrive, when every actor and spectator in the colossal tragedy sleep in dust.

Consider, too, the possible consequences! A Nation's loss of self-respect, which means disintegration and extinction—our Honor defiled, not so much through defeat by inferior numbers, or because our superior thrift and intelligence avail nothing, as by the intolerable consciousness that Apathy, Cowardice, and Schism vanquished us—our belittlement as a Nation, shut up to a belt of Continent, between

jealous and powerful rivals, at least one of them, exultant, domineering, and unscrupulous—a Mississippi without an outlet—but half the Lakes, and a strip of sea-board at the sun-rising and setting—the moral sense of foreign Christians, wounded by us and condemnatory of us; and the asserted vindication, by the sword's arbitration, of the System of Slavery, as a foundation-stone in a new Government, with its legalized, diffused, and perpetuated crimes against Humanity, Religion, and God.

What Wife, glancing at this scanty outline, remembering that no human pen can fill it—that no eye but that of God can compass it—would fold the arms of short-sighted love around her volunteering Husband's neck? What true Maiden would quench with the cold waters of selfishness the patriotic fire of Lover or Brother, or even consent to the attention of one so sordid or timid, that he will not heed his native Country's cry? What Mother would not give the sword to her son, though she could not see him, because of her tears, or audibly bless him, because of her distress?

New Jersey's quota is not yet full. Where is the fair allotment from this Township? Are there none here, who ought to be in the field? I call upon you, Men of this Congregation! There is a reason in your wealth or competency for your prompt enrolment. Your absence will bring no pecuniary suffering to them you love.

But if your kindred need a substitute for your in-

dustry; justice, not almsgiving, shall provide it. Care of them you leave is fully and fairly earned at our hands.

We would gladly retain all our men and youth, were Friendship alone consulted; but let the just proportion of them speak the heroic resolve—We will go!—and here, in the High Court of Jehovah of Hosts, the Hymn of Liberty's Champions shall greet them, and the Prayer of Christian Patriotism shall consecrate them.

The second way, in which we can “put to more strength,” is by cultivating Unanimity.

The many questions, before the People, are included in one—Shall this Republic be a Unit? Whatever draws public attention from this vital point weakens us. They are foes, who seek to scatter our thought. If the North had truly but one mind, this War would leap to a triumphant end. A faction, here, is more formidable than a rebel regiment. A disaffected citizen is a wedge of rupture. The professed neutral is a practical Traitor. Lack of sympathy for our Government is a crime.

Would we were sensitive to the inexorable and tremendous needs of the Hour! They have changed relations and words. True leniency is Rigor. The indiscriminate severity of Justice is Magnanimity and Clemency. That tribunal is the real Peace-Maker, which only waits to prove guilt before it strikes. Would we only realized that we have nothing to fear from Justice, let its bolt fall where it may! Would

that our joined hands poured punishment upon proved Disloyalty ! Why do not considerations of Safety and Honor unite the North ! Away with all distinction but that of loyal efficiency ! Silent be all partisan clamor, and dead all personal Ambition !

O for a pure and prevalent sentiment, that would trample under foot, not by lawless personal vengeance, but by authorized Courts, the mere Politicians, either secretly allied to the South, or rabid for power and pelf, and so manufacturing or reviving party names and issues—the Zealots, blind to all ideas but one, bent upon subordinating to that both the Nation and the War, and either reckless or thoughtless of inseparable results—the Grumblers, chronic fault-finders, upbraiding men and measures, with sight and palate only for the Carrion of imperfections and offences—the would-be Prophets, ever boding ill, but unchecked by the steady exposure, as time rolls on, of their ignorance and fatuity—the temporizing Cowards, over whose stores and houses are the Stars and Stripes to-day, but who would hurrah and kneel if the Slaveholders' Chief should victoriously enter New York City to-morrow. When parents “spare the rod”—when teachers chase moral suasion into loss of authority—when the Church withholds needed discipline—when the assassin is permitted to escape—when the over-persuaded Executive pardons the criminal—there is Pusillanimity, Cruelty, and Guilt. And when the froward children of the Republic—incorrigible dolts in the school of Freedom—apostates

from the spirit of the New Testament Church—haters and assailers of the Nation's Life—are apologized for and protected, who can measure our peril and meanness!

Our Nation is convulsed with throes, like those of birth—yet we are almost idle and dumb. We under-rate the Exigency. We disdain to believe that the evil day is actually upon us. How long shall we stain ourselves with the blood, and writhe with the pain, of self-inflicted wounds? When shall wholesome severity take the place of suicidal lenity? How long shall men and papers be tolerated, that breathe covert treachery and sedition? How long shall sympathizers with Secession be retained in office, or even permitted the control of their persons and property? Forbearance itself has no plea. Already, too long, has the Banner of the Union protected those who hate and villify it.

Ah! it is sickening to hear men and women who know better, vociferating "Peace! •Peace!—when there is no Peace."

The word hath a goodly sound. It glided to earth from the vocabulary of Heaven, when the Son of David was born.

But Peace without Honor—Peace, except on the solid basis of Righteousness, is Infamy, Anguish, and Ruin. Let us not confound the temper and the act of Forgiveness! They are widely different. We should have the former under all circumstances. No injury can warrant even the disposition to retaliate.

“Vengeance is Mine ; I will repay, saith the Lord.”
 “Charity thinketh no evil.” The spirit of Love depends upon ourselves. But not so with the forgiving act. Its propriety is contingent. Forgive a repentant offender “seventy times seven times,” but forgive him not once while defiant. As often as he asks to be forgiven, forgive him ; but waste not the celestial grace, and become not partaker of his evil deeds, by favoring callousness and disdain. The Lord Himself pardons the penitent suppliant only. Persistence in known sin makes Mercy impossible. So He would have us set a flinty front against this headstrong and hateful outbreak of States. Their relenting should be welcomed, but their contumacy should be scourged into extinction. As citizens, as patriots, as Christians, we ought to be positive, inflexible, vehement. Here is room for noble emulation. Whosoever moulds opposing opinions into zeal for the wholeness of our Government—whoever scatters the fears of the timorous, the chimeras of the credulous, or the vacillation of the double-minded—whoever inspires the public heart with tranquility, courage, and liberality, reinforces every Union Encampment from the Potomac to the Mississippi.

Thus must we do, or indellibly record ourselves unjust to our soldiers, bleeding, languishing, dying, dead—unjust to the undaunted throngs that wait but their Chieftain’s word—unjust to the memory of our Fathers, and to our Sacred Cause. Yes ! we repeat the schoolboy’s copy as our watchword now, “United,

we stand; Divided, we fall!" Let it be the criterion of public plans, and the mould of private conduct! Hint disaffection, suggest compromise, and millions of throats shall hurl in your face your true name—Traitor!

Give your hand to your neighbor. Hold it as though your hands had grown together. Bid him extend his remaining hand. Do likewise. Let hand marry hand, till the fleshy chain has linked the North in indissoluble Brotherhood. Then we need be disquieted as little by foreign scowls as by domestic raids. Then shall the Rebellion hasten to hide its dishonored head in a perpetual grave.

There is a lack—a national motto, reflecting the policy of the Administration, and the heart of the People—a universal pass-word, born of Genius, hallowed by Religion, sanctioned by Authority, and surcharged with Patriotism and Liberty—in words simple, few, and short, agreeing with song, oration, and prayer—trenchant, talismanic words, that would educate, thrill, and unify the good and true at North and South. May God aid some one thus to minister to the Right!

The third and highest way in which we may "put to more strength," is by reliance upon God.

It is here we have mainly failed. Like Nebuchadnezzar, who "walked in the palace of the kingdom of Babylon, and said—Is not this great Babylon that I have built for the house of the kingdom, by the might of my power and for the honor of my

majesty?"—we, too, have complacently boasted—Behold that magnificent multitude of volunteers, with its efficient leaders, and immense reserve of twelve hundred thousand men, with national resources over which not a wave of depletion has yet rolled; our Cabinet, too, with the People's Man at its head, and his Premier, a match for England's diplomatists, and even for the crafty and reticent Napoleon! These have been our trust. This has been our self-praiseful talk all the day long. We have forgotten that it is "through God we shall do valiantly; for He it is that shall tread down our enemies." Far from pleading, "O God, give us help from trouble, for vain is the help of man," we have called upon Generals—we have "trusted in chariots and horses." All this we must unlearn and renounce. If we had an army of a million, in the prime of discipline and health, swayed as one servant by the Genius of War, it would find repulse either in the enemy's charge or in victory itself, were not God in the van. "We can do nothing against the Truth, but for the Truth." The hope of the North is the Church of Jesus Christ. If His Bride yields to worldliness, "casting off fear and restraining prayer before God," we shall smart to our marrow. There is no substitute for Trust in God. Without it, write "Vanity of vanities" upon armaments, battalions, navies, generals, and statesmen. "God only is our Rock and our Salvation." It is God that avengeth us, and subdueth the people

under us. One whisper of Faith is worth more than ten thousand regiments. "The gates of Hell shall not prevail against the Church." Is not the Mighty Maker's eye watching the humblest of His suffering creatures? "And shall He not avenge His own elect, which cry day and night unto Him, though He bear long with them? I tell you that He will avenge them speedily"! We should have no more tantalizing pauses in the story of the War, and no more dubious victories, if speeches were exchanged for prayers, and processions with banner and band for silent gatherings in the House of God; if self-glorification and silly threat gave place to tearful confessions of personal sin and dependence, angry disputes to honest self-inquiries, and omnivorous readings of secular newspapers to devout studies of God in History, and of God in Revelation. Honor to our Administration! Honor to our Army! But—our hope is in them who can pray.

In order to true Reliance upon God, three things are essential. First, that we do our part. God has conjoined Work and Faith. We must not put them asunder. The idle are the unbelieving and the un-blessed. When the heathen came to fight against Jerusalem, the Jews "made their prayer unto God, *and set a watch against*" the foe, "day and night." This was right. So we must do. Reliance upon God to do the work which our laziness avoids, to supply the treasure which our parsimony denies, or the men whom our selfishness detains, is presumption

and guilt. An element and proof of Trust is personal devotedness. It is no use to call upon God—it is impossible to rely upon God—till we are doing our part. Neglect of means is fatal to Trust.

The second essential is a Just Cause. Without this, no extent and fidelity of military preparation are of the least avail. Napoleon the First may impiously say, “God is on the side of the heavier battalions;” but the child-reader of the Bible knows that, with the God of Israel, “one shall chase a thousand, and two put ten thousand to flight;” for “their Rock has sold them, and the Lord has shut them up.”

But “the Lord of Hosts is with us.” “For a small moment He has forsaken us, but with great mercies He will gather us.” We say not, we dream not, that we are sinless. Else why this grievous tribulation? The Lord is rewarding us “according to our works.” It is amazing patience that He has spared us so long. Be ours the sackcloth and lamentation, the “godly sorrow” and renewed life! But in the momentous alternatives—Liberty or Bondage—Union or Division—we know we are right.

And, lastly, it is indispensable that our hearts be clean. The material work may be thoroughly done. Abstract study of the case may prove our “quarrel just.” But if our temper is wrong, God will chastise us. So long as we venture upon dictation or fretfulness, we shall be racked with suspense and plagued with reverse. He is “the Lord God Omnipotent.” “His ways are not our ways; His thoughts are not

our thoughts." Ours must be a filial acquiescence in His will, though we cannot trace its workings or forecast its consummation; ours the spirit which sacrifices self and sings when all is gone; ours the humility which says, "Ascribe ye strength unto God"! "Let the God of my Salvation be exalted!" ours the charity which "blesses them that curse us, and does good to those that hate us;" ours the prayer that faints not though our Father hides His power—prayer for our deluded foes, whom we love as we smite—prayer for our gallant army on sea and land—prayer for our Government, Legislative and Executive—prayer for the President. The Lord God of our Fathers be with Abraham Lincoln! In him may the nation realize the prayer of England's patriot-poet—

" Ah God! for a Man with heart, head, hand,
Like some of the simple great ones, gone
Forever and ever by.
One still strong Man in a blatant land,
Whatever they call him—what care I?
Aristocrat—Democrat—Autocrat—one
Who can rule, and dare not lie."

Then—"trust in God at all times, ye people, pour out your heart before Him." "In the Name of our God, let us set up our banners! God is a Refuge for us."

" Let all the People say—Amen!"

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